

# Dr. Kirpal Singh's

## The Sikhs and Transfer of Power@ (1942-1947)

### - A Critical Appreciation

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@ The Book has been published by Publications Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala. 147002. Pages 175  
Price. (Hard Cover) Rs. 180.

Since 1972, when Dr Kirpal Singh's collection of documents concerning the '*Partition of the Punjab - 1947*' was first brought out by Punjabi University, it has been the foundation of all studies relating to the Partition of the Punjab. Documents concerning the transfer of power and related developments were published earlier in 1970 by Penderel Moon, Mansergh and Lumby. Other such series, like the 'Towards Freedom' series of the ICHR or the *Punjab Politics* series of Lionel Carter have been published later. But no single set of selections is as useful as Dr Singh's for understanding the chain of events and the cross current of opinions leading to the partition of the province. The popularity of Dr Singh's *Select Documents* saw new editions, the latest being that launched by National Book Shop, Delhi, 2006. Dr Singh judiciously mentions on the jacket that the documents included in the book concern the history of both India as well as Pakistan and they would be relevant for studying the history of both the Indian and Pakistani Punjab, Haryana and also Himachal (since the carving out of these new provinces out of former undivided Punjab). The people of all these territories would be able to learn from Dr Singh's present work how and why the Sikhs felt compelled to accept a partition of their Holy space and homeland in the Punjab, what were the options open to them and what was ultimately the shape in which the final dispensation came.

Through his choice of documents and from the stray remarks in the introductory chapter it is obvious that Dr Singh was one of those many optimists who entertained hopes that the Indian National Congress would honour the trust bestowed on them by the Sikhs. Thus, in spite of the efforts of many British politicians like Sir Stafford Cripps (1889-1952), to encourage the Sikhs to come to an understanding with the Muslim League, the Sikhs remained steadfast in their commitment to the Congress. Although there were brief interludes of divergence, as during the Quit India Movement of 1942 when the Sikhs constituted the Khalsa Defence of India League to protect their martial tradition in the army, they were the main backbone of the Congress and civil disobedience movements, arrest, imprisonment, deportation and execution in large numbers (probably the highest among all Indians). As Dr Singh's last chapters show, it was the Sikhs who bore the main brunt of the partition holocausts. The post-colonial political order in India was thus, in a sense, a product of the martyrdom of the Sikhs in the cause of freedom from British Rule. Just as Punjab had shielded the rest of India from all enemy onslaught, since time immemorial, through its frontier-land position, similarly at the time of transfer of power, too, it is this province and its valiant inhabitants who had to suffer the most painful pangs of partition.

The Punjab represented a far-flung frontier region of India judging by its geographical location, but so far as its geopolitical importance was concerned, it occupied the center-stage of Indian politics during the high noon of colonial regime. To the British, Punjab was the core region of their imperial possessions in the sub-continent, as this was the region which had given the British a fresh lease of life in 1857 by providing them with the military recruits which helped them to meet the challenge from their rebellious subjects in the 'heartland'. <sup>1</sup> Henceforth, in any future calculation of an imperial strategy for India,

Punjab always figured on the top. The government took up a very ambitious programme of constructing irrigation canals in the region to water the arid table lands between its five rivers to keep the people in good harvest and humour.<sup>2</sup> This enabled Punjab to add a new feather in its plume, making it the food bowl for the rest of India.

The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 had deliberately shifted the focus of political importance to rural Punjab giving it 29 constituencies of which 23 were west of Lahore, in the areas dominated by the estates of the Muslims. The urban areas east of Lahore, Jullunder and Ambala where most of the Hindus and the Sikhs were concentrated, were given only 4.<sup>3</sup> The framing of the constituencies itself betrayed a deliberate design on the part of the British to bring the rural magnates of West Punjab to dominate the politics of the province. The Muslim landlords of west Punjab found a common meeting ground with their Jat counterparts of south-east Punjab in a political platform organized by a very talented Muslim leader, Mian Fazl-i-Husain. This was the Punjab National Unionist Party, which controlled the political destiny of the province since 1923 till nearly the disintegration of the British rule in the sub-continent.<sup>4</sup>

Although this government of landed notables successfully kept up a pretence of communal solidarity, yet it furtively tried to promote the cause of the Muslims in education, municipal administration and judicial and civil service by introducing quotas for them on the plea of the backward state of the Muslims. This was often not to the liking of the Hindus and the Sikhs, who, far surpassed their Muslim brethren in these matters. Thus an undercurrent of hostility was brewing among the elites of the three communities in spite of their political cooperation in the Punjab National Unionist Party.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1901 the British had also aimed at excluding the trading and commercial classes from all influence in rural areas by putting a statutory ban on the mortgage and foreclosure of land by people who did not come from an agricultural background.<sup>6</sup> This law had an adverse effect on Hindu and Arora Sikh money-lenders and even service people who lived off the interest earned on their surplus funds which they used to lend out to the indigent rural producers. This measure broke the backbone of the Congress in the Punjab as most of its support base was in the ranks of the Hindus or a sprinkling of upper middle class Sikh professional or service people. However, as the Congress was keen to maintain a secular and pro-peasant image on an all- India level, it could not organize an effective resistance to these measures with any semblance of propriety.<sup>7</sup>

With its all-India concern, the Congress often acted as an impediment in taking an effective stand in provincial politics. Thus in 1916 Congress conceded a weightage to U.P. Muslims which was quite out of proportion to their numbers. This was done to secure the support of the Muslims in the anti-partition agitations organized by the Congress.<sup>8</sup> This began a parting of the ways between the Sikhs and the Congress, as the Sikhs discovered that when it came to the question of special weightage, Congressmen were rarely so enthusiastic. Thus in 1919 the Sikhs launched their own organization – The Central Sikh League to carry on the struggle for the rights of the Sikhs.<sup>9</sup>

The struggle of the Sikhs for their own gurdwaras, which had succumbed to the immoral influence of their *mahants*, brought the Sikhs to the forefront of national politics.<sup>10</sup> Henceforth the Sikhs became a potent force in the political negotiations affecting the province. The primary concern of the Sikhs in those years was to resist further political encroachment by the Muslims in the province. The Sikhs were numerically weak compared to the other two communities but their contributions to the military efforts of the country and the land revenue of the province was not negligible (in the Lahore division the Sikhs paid 46% of the land revenue). It is from the Sikhs that the British had conquered the province

and the Sikhs claimed their fair share in the representative mechanism of the province.<sup>11</sup> The Congress Party's apathy to Sikh fears of Muslim domination in the Punjab were evinced time and time again in the Nehru Report (1928) which had proposed to concede separate constituencies for a majority community (the Muslims were about 51% of the population of the Punjab at this time), Congress passivity to the Communal Award of 1932 conceding Muslims a statutory majority in the Punjab, Congress enthusiasm for the federal scheme of 1935 and their astounding performance at the ballot box in all the non-Muslim provinces in 1937 in accordance with the provisions Act of 1935.

Congress chauvinism and majoritarian attitude towards the minorities since the overwhelming election victories of 1937 brought about certain new developments in the politics of the Punjab where neither the Congress nor the Muslim League was a force to be reckoned with. In 1937 the Punjab National Unionist Party under the able leadership of Sir Sikander Hayat Khan had won an impressive majority in the Punjab Legislative Assembly. However, he was prevailed upon by many important Muslim leaders, like Allama Iqbal and Jahanara Shah Nawaz Khan to attend the Muslim League session at Lucknow, in October 1937 to infuse a new life into the Muslim League since its election debacle in the same year. The Muslim members of Unionist Party numbered a solid 91 and many in the Muslim League would like them to have a double membership - and be known as Muslim League Unionists. Congress highhandedness in the non-Muslim provinces at this time convinced Sir Sikander of the wisdom of such a move and he negotiated the Sikander Jinnah Pact to bolster up the moribund Muslim League and to mobilize some support against the threats from an enormously strengthened Congress.<sup>12</sup>

Sir Sikander Hayat Khan was, however, aware of the apprehensions which might arise in the mind of his non-Muslim colleagues in the Unionist Party through his closeness with the Muslim League. He knew that it was difficult to run the administration in the Punjab without the support of the non-Muslims. He therefore indulged in a lot of double-speak, drawing close to the Muslim League and yet denying such closeness in his dealings with

his party colleagues. Jinnah now tried to use Sikander's prevarications to his advantage and got the Pakistan Resolution passed at Lahore in 1940 on the soil of Punjab.<sup>13</sup>

It has been argued that the Pakistan Resolution was nothing more than a 'tactical move', 'a bargain counter' to wring more concessions from the Congress. But in the popular mind the word 'Pakistan' became synonymous with 'Muslim Raj' and, as Penderel Moon had observed, 'once the cry was raised how would it be silenced'.<sup>14</sup>

The Lahore Resolution sounded the death knell of the social order where "three communities (Muslim, Hindu and Sikh) were closely intermingled, spoke a common language, shared a common provincial pride and to some extent, a common culture".<sup>15</sup> It raised the spectre of a 'Muslim Raj' in the minds of the Sikhs who observed a '*ghallugara day*' to revive the memories of the discomfiture of the Sikhs in the hands of Ahmad Shah Abdali in 1762.

Dr. Kirpal Singh has taken up the Lahore Resolution of 1940 as his starting point, leading to the chain of events that went into the making of the partition of the Punjab. Dr. Singh's volume displays a special concern for the role of the Sikhs in these events. In the introductory chapter he engages in an attempt to familiarize the reader with the political atmosphere of the province preceding the Lahore Resolution. The tension between the Hindu and Sikh moneylenders and the Muslim peasants was often brought to the fore as during the plague in Multan in 1922 when Hindu graindealers' shops were looted and records were burnt, and again during the Hindu-Muslim riot at Kohat in 1923-24.

The plan of finding a solution to the communal tangle through some sort of a division of the

province had long been in the air. Lala Lajpat Rai had envisaged a division of the eastern part of the province from the western. This idea was probably prompted by his realization that the Congress could never make much headway in the rural constituencies of western Punjab which always swayed to the dictates of their *pirs* and *sajjada nashins*, who happened also to be big owners of land.

Muslim leaders like Iqbal also thought that the Ambala Division was queering the pitch for the Muslims in the Punjab and Iqbal would like it to be separated from the rest of Punjab, so that the Muslims could dominate it without any restraint. Shah Nawaz Khan too thought the same.

During the Round Table Conference of 1931 the Sikhs too had asked for drawing up the frontiers of Punjab anew, leaving out Ranjit Singh's acquisitions in west Punjab (except Sikh cultivated Lyallpur and Montgomery). The Lahore Resolution's suggestion for a "grouping of geographically contiguous units" was in the same tradition.

Yet many were unable to stomach the idea of the partition of the province. Cripps' proposal to allow provinces the right to secede from the Indian Union was not welcomed by the non-Muslims. Master Tara Singh's suggestion for a partition of the Punjab and the Shiromani Akali Dal's Azad Punjab scheme were all designed to pressurize the Muslim League to soften their stand. Rajagopalachari's idea of allowing the right of self-determination to the Muslim majority areas roused all Congressmen into a fury of indignation. Sikander Hayat Khan, who had written to Governor Glancy to allow non-Muslims to break away from Punjab, had to retrace his stand in the Punjab Legislative Assembly and declare in 1941 that "we do not ask for the freedom where there may be Muslim Raj here and Hindu Raj elsewhere. If that is what Pakistan means, I will have nothing to do with it." Gandhi would not agree to the partition of the Punjab and would permit plebiscites only in the North-West, Bengal and Assam. Nor did Jinnah envisage the partition of a province when he wanted a "settlement between two major nations" and not a secession from an existing union.

In spite of all misgivings and doubts the idea of a partition of the province was forced on the Congress by the terrible riots of March 1947 in Multan and Rawalpindi. Once partition was decided upon, the population should have been gradually and peacefully phased out of their respective areas to the areas of their stronghold. However, the government and the political leaders had been dragging their feet till the partition holocausts took place on both sides of the border suddenly, engulfing all civilized norms of behaviour and reducing human beings to monstrous atrocities. Penderel Moon had proposed long ago that an area of Sikh stronghold should be created in East Punjab, bringing Sikhs from West Punjab to it and leaving out Rohtak, Hissar, Gurgaon and Karnal out of it. If his plans had been heeded, the experience of partition would have been much more tolerable for all three communities that were concerned.

After all these, the Boundary Commission had many formalities to be completed and the line of demarcation between two new-born states had to be drawn. Documents of August 1947 show that negotiations went on till the eleventh hour for the inclusion of Lyallpur and Nankana Sahib estate – a 2,800 sq miles non-Muslim majority tract west of the Ravi, contiguous to the Lahore District, where 71% of the land revenue was paid by the non-Muslims. Dr Singh provided an idea of the economic hardships awaiting the refugees to East Punjab comparing the wheat production figures in both parts of the Punjab. Of the total wheat production of the Punjab, 71% came from the west while only 29% was produced in the east. Rice production in the west was 85.6% while being 14.4% in the east. In cotton production too, the west far surpassed the east. Dr Singh's documentation thus clearly

establishes the dire calamity that had been awaiting the migrants to east Punjab so far as food and clothing was concerned.

Documents are usually as dry as dust. They merely record what had happened. The editor of a volume of documents cannot add any comments to interpret the documents. But the arrangement of the documents, the collection of an array of information for and against some decisions might unravel the wisdom or otherwise of a course of actions. To that extent Dr Singh's volume has a tale to tell. It shows the indignation of the Sikhs at the indecisiveness of the British, the intransigence of the Congress leaders, the singular determination of the Muslim leaders and the despair of the Sikh leaders in the wilderness. The documents leave a sober reader with the fateful inevitability of a Greek tragedy to the undoing of the Punjab that Maharaja Ranjit Singh had consolidated with such great sagacity and vigour – the dream of a great Punjab which haunts every Sikh even to this day.



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